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ABSTRACT

The significant progress made in the United States' foreign language education system in recent decades is not enough. If the current system is to expand adult foreign language competency and use, both a change of perspective and a new organizational superstructure are necessary to serve those needs more directly, which in turn demands a coordinated national effort. A number of professional language associations and legislators are joining the effort to develop a national strategy. The experience of other countries can be very helpful in the planning process. Research and consultation with scholars from other countries suggests that a national plan should include: expansion of demand for foreign language skills; expansion and systematization of adult language teaching services; creation of a system for foreign language skill reinforcement, rejuvenation, and upgrading; using the language skills of immigrant communities as a national resource; providing specialized language services; developing university faculty and student language competency outside the foreign language departments; concentrating on high-level language skills; tying language learning to foreign experience; and broadening the spectrum of foreign languages available for adult and occupational use. Existing, isolated efforts must be coordinated and expanded to be effective. (MSE)

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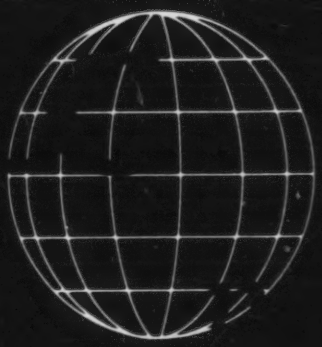

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A NATIONAL PLAN FOR A USE-ORIENTED FOREIGN LANGUAGE SYSTEM

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About the Author

Richard D. Lambert is director of the National Foreign Language Center at The Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C., professor emeritus of Sociology and South Asian Regional Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and editor of *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. He is author of *The Language and Area Studies Review, Points of Leverage: An Agenda for a National Foundation for International Studies, Beyond Growth: The Next Stage in Language and Area Studies*, and *The Transformation of an Indian Labor Market: The Case of Pune*, and edited, with Sarah Moore, *Foreign Language in the Workplace*. Dr. Lambert's most recent book, *International Studies and the Undergraduate*, is the result of a massive two-year survey of undergraduate international education in the United States, conducted for the American Council on Education.

About the *Position Papers on Foreign Language Policy*

This is the second in a new series of *Position Papers* published by the National Foreign Language Center.

The papers in this series address significant issues in foreign language policy. As the title of the series suggests, their purpose is to stimulate discussion both within and outside the foreign language field on strategies for future development. The views expressed in these papers are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NFLC or of The Johns Hopkins University.

About the National Foreign Language Center

The National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) is dedicated to improving the foreign language competency of Americans. The NFLC emphasizes the formulation of public policy to make our language teaching systems responsive to national needs. Its primary tools in carrying out this objective are:

- **Surveys** - NFLC conducts surveys to collect previously unavailable information on issues concerning national strength and productivity in foreign language instruction, and our foreign language needs in the service of the economic, diplomatic, and security interests of the nation.
- **National Policy Planning Groups** - In order to address major foreign language policy issues, NFLC convenes national planning groups that bring together users of foreign language services and representatives of the language instructional delivery systems in formal education, the government, and the for-profit sector.
- **Research** - NFLC conducts research on innovative, primarily individual-oriented strategies of language learning to meet the nation's foreign language needs of the future.

In addition the NFLC maintains an Institute of Advanced Studies where individual scholars work on projects of their own choosing.

The results of these surveys, discussions, and research are made available through NFLC's publications, such as these *Position Papers*, and they form the basis of fresh policy recommendations addressed to national leaders and decision-makers.

NFLC was established in 1987 as part of The Johns Hopkins University with funding from four private foundations: The Exxon Education Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Pew Memorial Trusts.

A National Plan for a Use-Oriented Foreign Language System

RICHARD D. LAMBERT
National Foreign Language Center

For decades there has been a steady drumbeat of commentary lamenting America's devout monolingualism in a polyglot world. By now all are aware that our society's comfortable nestling in its cocoon of English is immensely costly. We are handicapped in international business, in diplomacy, and in our scientific and technological relations with the rest of the world. We are embarrassed when we see on CNN how many people around the world speak our language well. Even allowing for the fact that English is a world language, the paucity of Americans who speak any other language well is a standing joke in international circles. Surely one of the priorities on our national agenda, one made more urgent by the increasing internationalization of our economy and our political system, is to create a more linguistically competent America.

The Need for New Initiatives

Over the past three decades important steps have been taken to improve our foreign language instructional system. It operates today considerably more effectively than it did twenty or thirty years ago. The trouble is that the steps taken — substantial improvements in the technology of language teaching, the upgrading of teachers' competencies, the spreading of requirements that more and more high school and college students take a year or two of Spanish, French, or German, the introduction at the margin of a few instructional programs for non-Western languages — are not enough. By themselves they will not produce more adults who can and do comfortably use a wider range of foreign languages in their work and in other parts of their daily lives. In particular, the connection between our school-based instructional system and actual adult use of a foreign language is at best indistinct. Our current system adopts the trickle-up theory: if enough students get some exposure to foreign language instruction while they are in school, then a substantial number of Americans will get, retain, and actually use a foreign language when they become adults. There is little evidence that this in fact happens.

I do not mean to undervalue the importance of continued investments in the basic infrastructure of foreign language instruction. Without such investments, it will be impossible to carry out the new use-oriented initiatives of the kind we are proposing at the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC). Nor do I mean to denigrate the skill and dedication of the many teachers who work to maintain and improve the current system or to belittle the important humanistic general education goals served by much of current foreign language instruction. However, if the current system is to expand adult foreign language competency and use, it needs both a change of perspective and a new organizational superstructure that will serve those needs more directly.

Creating that superstructure to link our current foreign language educational system to adult use demands a coordinated national effort. It calls for a catalytic national plan, one that identifies the points of leverage in the current system that can make it more supportive of adult language use and adds new programs that will serve the needs of adult users of foreign languages when they arise.

Interest in a National Plan

We at the NFLC are pleased to note that a number of professional foreign language associations, after initial resistance to the need for such a plan, are now joining in the effort to develop a national strategy. We also note that several members of Congress are interested in

developing a forward-looking national plan and in deciding where national investments might most profitably be made. It is time to focus a national dialogue on what an adult-use oriented national foreign language plan might be.

The National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) was established to help make our foreign language system more responsive to national needs. Hence, since its founding many of the activities of the NFLC have been devoted to the development of just such a national plan. The NFLC has assembled and published a symposium of papers describing current developments in occupational foreign language training here and abroad. It has held meetings with representatives of various federal agencies and congressional advisory offices that inform the making of public policy and, upon request, has provided policy-relevant information and advice on foreign language instruction to congressional committees. It has delineated the various components of our national system, including the language teaching capacities of the federal government, commercial language schools, and our formal educational system. It has explored the demand for and utilization of foreign languages in the corporate, governmental, and academic worlds. It has followed the careers of students with high-level foreign language competencies who are training specifically for international business. It is working with the U.S. International Cultural and Trade Center to help meet the specific needs of business in foreign languages. In collaboration with representatives of federal agencies and corporate executives, it has begun the process of establishing consensus standards for commercial language schools. It has sponsored a detailed review of state policy with respect to foreign language instruction. Currently, the NFLC is initiating a national seminar to meet periodically specifically to discuss language policy issues.

In helping to develop a use-oriented national plan for foreign language instruction in the United States, the experience of other countries, particularly those in Europe, can be of great interest. Even allowing for the very different social and administrative framework in which language policy is developed in Europe, there is much we can learn. Typically, European plans heavily emphasize adult use of foreign languages of the kind we believe is appropriate for the American national plan we are proposing. Indeed, the European planning process often begins with a survey of adult use, and the plan itself integrates both adult and school-based language teaching programs into a single administrative framework.

To draw on this experience, the NFLC has made a special effort to bring the foreign language planning experience of other countries to the attention of American audiences. Officers of the NFLC have served as official observers and representatives of the United States in several language policy planning meetings of the Council of Europe. In addition, the NFLC has brought to the Center as fellows of our Institute of Advanced Studies a number of distinguished scholars who have been centrally involved in the creation of both plans for individual countries and the evolving transnational plans in Europe. These scholars have included leaders in the development of national plans for Australia, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, and for the multicountry plans of the Council of Europe and the European Community. The NFLC is systematically reviewing many of these plans and will publish analytic reports discussing their relevance to the American setting.

Proposed National Agenda

This research and consultation suggest that our national plan should include the following features:

Expansion of demand for foreign language skills. Europeans can take for granted an extensive and fully institutionalized demand for foreign language skills. What makes our foreign language educational system so artificial, so non-goal directed, is that employer demand for such skills is modest at best. Currently, the largest and most organized market for foreign language skills is the federal government. Programs dedicated to increasing foreign language utilization in the private sector — business, engineering, health, science, journalism — are a first priority. Clearly, foreign language skills by themselves are not enough. They must be combined with the necessary technical skills to make them truly useful.

Expansion and systematization of adult language teaching services. We need to pay direct attention to strengthening our existing facilities for teaching foreign languages to adults. Aside from the federal government's language schools, proprietary language schools and self-tutoring now serve what little demand there is for adult language learning. In other countries such activities are either state sponsored or monitored, and they are integrated into the larger language teaching system. Yet these schools and self-tutoring courses are

an important part of our national language instructional system. Some expansion and ordering of this section of our language teaching system are very much in order.

Creation of a system for foreign language skill reinforcement, rejuvenation, and upgrading. We expend almost all of our national resources for foreign language learning on first-time, low-level language learning among high school and college students, then watch those minimal skills decay and disappear through lack of use or reinforcement. If and when adults need foreign language skills, the only choice available is to start all over. This is immensely wasteful. We need a set of institutions that will reinforce and build upon past language learning.

Utilizing the language skills of immigrant communities as a national resource. It is absurd that we spend so much of our time and money giving monolingual Americans a foreign language competency while we make little use of and, indeed, work to displace non-English-language competencies within our immigrant communities. We need a well-thought out plan for raising these competencies to a professionally useful level and adding the occupational skills to make them marketable.

Extending the technology of distance learning to occupational foreign language instruction. Corporations and the federal government have made immense strides in the development of electronic instruction at a distance for a large variety of skills. However, the only use made of such technology in foreign language instruction is to replicate the classroom for students not otherwise served. The use of technology for providing on-site and on-demand foreign language instruction for occupational use is an obvious next step. Some of the hundreds of millions of dollars of federal funds spent under the STAR school program for the expansion of distance learning in high schools could be shifted to be used by dispersed learners in business, science, and other occupations.

Providing specialized language services. Not all adult needs require a fully developed foreign language competency. Business particularly requires more partial, more occasional services such as translation and interpreting. Large corporations and the federal government can meet these needs in-house or through the use of commercial services. They can also experiment with machine translation, a development in which the Japanese and Germans are far ahead of us. Most corporations and adults, however, have nowhere to go for occasional foreign language services. Other countries officially sponsor and regulate providers of such services. We should consider whether this makes sense in the American context.

On campuses, developing the foreign language competencies of the faculty and students outside of the foreign language departments. We will make little progress in adding a use orientation to our system of foreign language instruction unless the place where most of that instruction is given — the university or college campus — becomes a place where foreign language use is common. This will not happen until first the faculty and then the students in a full range of academic disciplines, particularly the applied and professional disciplines, are themselves foreign language competent, and use those competencies in their teaching and professional work. Overcoming the institutional and personal impediments to this transformation is both exceedingly difficult and of high national importance if we are to make a long-term advance in promoting use-oriented foreign language instruction.

Concentrating on high-level foreign language skills. One of the most important hurdles in promoting adult, particularly occupational, use of foreign languages is that relatively few students get enough language training to make it really usable. With a few exceptions, our current foreign language system concentrates on providing a large number of students with a year or two of foreign language. Frustrated language teachers know very well that this is just a beginning, but about 50 percent of students stop taking foreign languages after the first year and another 50 percent after the second year. Most advanced classes beyond the third year are taken by foreign language majors and focus on the study of literature. Moreover, the various layers of the educational system that would make foreign language learning cumulative for the individual learner are only very loosely articulated so that it is difficult for a learner to be exposed to consistent training throughout his/her foreign language learning career. The drive for extending one- or two-year foreign language requirements to more and more students does not solve this set of basic problems. A very high priority is the development of an integrated but flexible system so that we can provide a truly high level of foreign language skills to at least a subset of students who will use them as adults.

Tying language learning to foreign experience. It is difficult if not impossible to gain a high level of skill in

foreign languages without some exposure to that language in the country where it is spoken. European plans for developing use-oriented foreign language instruction are linked to imaginative programs for sending large numbers of university students — the target is 10 percent of all students with an emphasis on applied and professional students — to study in other countries. To qualify for those programs, students must attain a usable skill level in the language of the country before they go. Our own study abroad programs tend to reach only a small proportion of our students and to leave out students majoring in professionally oriented disciplines who might use a foreign language competency in their occupations. Moreover, we tend to send our students to English-speaking countries. When they do go to other countries, too many students have too low a level of foreign language competency to get maximal advantage out of their foreign sojourn. And, of course, we have no study abroad programs for non-college students. We need a national plan to make study abroad serve more fully our national foreign language needs.

Broadening the spectrum of foreign languages available for adult and occupational use. Language instruction both in our formal educational system and in the proprietary schools that serve adult and occupational use is devoted overwhelmingly to the Western European languages. Yet it is not difficult to predict that the frontiers of our international economic and political involvements will be outside of Western Europe. Over the past thirty years, we have built up a substantial national capacity to teach many of the languages of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, a capacity unmatched in any other country. But instruction in most languages is confined largely to the training of graduate-level specialists or the federal government language schools. Neither is of much service to general occupational or adult use. Surely this capacity to teach such a large variety of languages is a major national resource that gives us a competitive advantage over the rest of the world. Making it available beyond the graduate-oriented programs in the research universities and the federal language schools and linking it to adult and occupational training is an obvious task for a national plan.

Existing Use-Oriented Language Programs

These, then, are some possible items in a national agenda for a use-oriented foreign language educational system. I do not mean to imply that these items are new or that there are no individual programs already in place addressing these issues. A few programs already exemplify use-oriented foreign language instruction. Harvard has a program tying foreign language use to general education courses. Earlham ties language learning during study abroad to use in substantive course work after the student's return. The Wharton School's Lauder Institute of International Management both demands high-level language skills for admission and stresses the use of such skills in its courses on international business. Ten of the leading American engineering schools have created a consortium to blend foreign language training and foreign study into the education of engineers. The University of Maryland engages American students in transnational, electronic-mediated live dialogues in which the need for a mastery of a foreign language grows out of the need to communicate ideas. Various area studies programs provide foreign language instruction with the full expectation that it will be used occupationally by their graduates. The Monterey Institute of International Studies and a number of college and university continuing education programs already provide language training specifically for business executives. Multimedia courses in Japanese for engineers and for scientists are being prepared at Cornell and MIT with help of the National Science Foundation. AT&T has introduced a national system making translators and interpreters available by telephone.

Coordinating and Supplementing

All these scattered programs are evidence of a beginning in the development of use-oriented language instruction. These widely scattered and disparate ventures need to be made more coordinated, more collectively purposeful. What we need is a national plan that nurtures and builds upon these existing initiatives and develops a collective strategy for creating a rational and effective use-oriented foreign language educational system. We must begin not only with what we have in foreign language instruction but what foreign language competencies adult Americans will need in the next century. Then we can put in place the fresh institutions and instructional goals we need.